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A Baker-Casey Showdown . . .

By publicly igniting the animosity between James A. Baker III and William J. Casey that had been quietly simmering for more than a year, the Carter briefing-book affair may accidentally force a resolution in the long-divided White House of Ronald Reagan.

More is at stake than who was responsible for obtaining and using material from Jimmy Carter's campaign. Even if the FBI investigation does not nail one or the other as culpable, well-informed insiders believe President Reagan cannot follow his instincts and avoid a choice this time. Their conduct toward each other the past two weeks means that either White House Chief of Staff Baker or Director of Central Intelligence Casey will have to go, according to Reagan advisers.

To the Washington establishment, that is the easiest of choices. Lobbyists, bureaucrats and especially the news media are grateful that Baker's accumulated power blunted the Reagan Revolution's full effects and view Casey as a doddering incompetent on the fringes of power. But Reaganite conservatives see Casey as their last chance to remove Baker's restraint on Reaganism going into the reelection campaign.

Casey is an unlikely hero for populist-conservatives dedicated to Baker's downfall. As Reagan's 1980 campaign manager, he personally was responsible for getting Baker from the failed George Bush presidential campaign. Fellow campaign officials saw Casey and Baker as similar figures from different generations: two very rich men who like the company of other rich people, two tenacious infighters unfettered by ideology.

That relationship was maintained during the Reagan administration's first year or more. But about a year ago, what one colleague describes as an "estrangement" set in. Under attack, from the right, Baker began eyeing Casey's job at the CIA as a safe harbor that would give him foreign policy experience. Casey knew that Baker aides were leaking Baker-for-CIA items and deeply resented it.

Casey also resented that his path to the Oval Office was barred by the presidential gatekeeper: Michael K. Deaver, deputy chief of staff and Baker's close collaborator. That led to Casey's grumbling inside the administration that the Baker-Deaver combo was doing Reagan a disservice by denying him access to the full range of opinions a president needs.

The anxiety of ardent poll-readers Baker and Deaver over public disapproval of Reagan's Central America policy contrasted with Casey's use of CIA resources against the communist tide there. Casey successfuly won out against Secretary of State George Shultz's proposed concession in the Geneva arms control talks, a hard line not conforming to Baker-Deaver strategy.

Still, Baker-Casey trouble did not surface until Baker's letter to House investigators, relating his "best recollection" that Casey gave him the Carter briefing book. Even assuming that Baker was telling the truth, White House insiders were stunned at such finger-pointing.

When one colleague asked Baker why he did it, his answer carried that quiet precision that makes him such a formidable presence: I said that because it was the truth and I was not about to face a perjury rap.

A less benign explanation for Baker's bluntness, bruited about at the White House, is his low opinion of Casey's ability to retaliate. One of the least articulate figures in public life at age 70 and famed for eccentric body language (such as chewing on his tie during a heated meeting), Casey is easy to underestimate.

It might have been a fatal mistake for Baker. Casey is not only more pugnacious than Baker's gentlemanly rivals on the White House senior staff, Edwin Meese III and William P. Clark; while Meese and Clark view such infighting with disdain, "Bill relishes it" (according to a Casey friend).

When Baker fingered him, Casey's antennae quivered. His friends say he saw Baker making the same move on him that he had made, with varying results, against Meese, Clark, Alexander Haig, Richard V. Allen, Raymond Donovan, James Watt and Anne Gorsuch. Accordingly, the CIA chief went to the Washington bureau of The New York Times to take the offensive by making clear that Baker had been delegated responsibility for the 1980 debate and as such must take responsibility for the current trouble.

Even if Reagan does not agree with that interpretation, and even if FBI-gathered evidence does not implicate either Baker or Casey, it is hard to imagine how they can sit at the same Cabinet table. If Reagan indeed picks between his bridge to the establishment and the rebuilder of the CIA's clandestine operations, the president's choice will signal what he wants, consciously or not, for the remaining days of his administration.